

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Game
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

BLUE-GRAY GNATCATCHER

Poliioptila caerulea

Family: SYLVIIDAE
B377

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: D. Gaines
Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt
Edited by: R. Duke

DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

An uncommon to common summer resident in xeric, upland woodland and scrub habitats, especially with oaks. Found in western Sierra Nevada (below about 1200 m (4000 ft), and from Trinity Co. south through the coastal drainages of southern California to the Mexican border. East of the Sierra Nevada, occurs below about 2300 m (7500 ft) from White Mts. south to Providence Mts., in Owens Valley, and along the eastern base of the Sierra Nevada from Mono Basin south. Apparently expanding summer range northward into northeastern California, where it has nested as far north as Eagle Lake, Lassen Co. (McCaskie et al. 1979). Preferred nesting habitats include valley foothill hardwood, pinyon-juniper, and chamise-redshank and mixed chaparral. Postbreeding wanderers and migrants occur above and outside breeding range. Common winter resident along Colorado River, in southern deserts, and along coast south of Santa Barbara Co.; increasingly rare to north along coast, and in Central Valley (Grinnell and Miller 1944, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Gleans insects, spiders, and other small invertebrates from foliage of shrubs and low trees, hovering to search outermost foliage. Makes short sallies to capture airborne prey (Root 1967).

Cover: Shrubs and low trees provide nesting, roosting, and other cover.

Reproduction: Builds lichen-covered, open-cup nest of plant fibers. Nest typically anchored to 5 cm (2 in) horizontal branch with spider silk; usually within 8 m (25 ft) of ground, rarely to 23 m (75 ft).

Water: No information found, but usually nests in arid habitats.

Pattern: Nesters most numerous where open woodland or scattered trees, especially oaks, are interspersed with chaparral, sagebrush, other brushy habitats.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: In northern and higher parts of range, arrives to breed in late March to late April, and departs in August or September. Arrives to winter in late August and departs by early April. Withdraws from northern and higher portions of breeding range in winter.

Home Range: In Arizona saguaro-palo verde desert, Root (1969a) reported a winter home range of 8.9 ha (22 ac). No additional information found, but home range in breeding season

probably equals territory.

Territory: In California woodland-chaparral, Root (1969) recorded an average territory of 1.9 ha (4.6 ac), range 0.9 to 3 ha (2.2 to 7.4 ac). In Kansas, Fitch (1958) reported foraging range of 2 nesting pairs as 0.5 and 0.9 ha (1.2 and 2.2 ac). In Sierra Nevada foothills, Grinnell and Storer (1924) estimated a breeding density of 25 pairs per km² (64 per mi²).

Reproduction: Monogamous. Peak of egg laying May and June. Clutch averages 4-5 eggs; frequently double-brooded. Incubation 13-15 days, by both sexes (Bent 1949, Root 1969a). Altricial young cared for by both sexes; fledge at 10-13 days (Bent 1949, Root 1969a).

Niche: Eggs and young preyed upon by jays, owls, hawks, magpies, snakes. Frequently parasitized by brown-headed cowbirds (Bent 1949, Root 1969a). Lowland populations greatly reduced by cowbird parasitism; apparently no longer breeds in Central Valley or coastal lowlands of San Diego Co. (Gaines 1977c, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

REFERENCES

- Bent, A. C. 1949. Life histories of North American thrushes, kinglets, and their allies. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 196. 454pp.
- Fitch, H. S. 1958. Home ranges, territories, and seasonal movements of vertebrates of the Natural History Reservation. Univ. Kans., Lawrence. Publ. Mus. Nat. Hist. 11:63-326.
- Gaines, D. 1977c. The status of selected riparian forest birds in California. A preliminary survey and review. Calif. Dep. Fish and Game, Sacramento. 72pp.
- Garrett, K., and J. Dunn. 1981. Birds of southern California. Los Angeles Audubon Soc. 408pp.
- Grinnell, J., and A. H. Miller. 1944. The distribution of the birds of California. Pac. Coast Avifauna No. 27. 608pp.
- Grinnell, J., and T. I. Storer. 1924. Animal life in the Yosemite. Univ. California Press, Berkeley. 752pp.
- McCaskie, G., P. De Benedictis, R. Erickson, and J. Morlan. 1979. Birds of northern California, an annotated field list. 2nd ed. Golden Gate Audubon Soc., Berkeley. 84pp.
- Root, R. B. 1967. The niche exploitation pattern of the blue-gray gnatcatcher. Ecol. Monogr. 37:317-350.
- Root, R. B. 1969a. The behavior and reproductive success of the blue-gray gnatcatcher. Condor 71:16-31.